New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

Volume XI, Number 17 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of August 21, 1950

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of August 21, 1950*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Live Wire"

Daily Mirror

August 18, 1950

'Live Wire,' Strictly For Laughs, Has Plenty

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Garson Kanin clicks again with "The Live Wire," which Mahatma Michael Todd brought to the Playhouse last evening. The new Kanin comedy has been breaking house records during a recent tune-up tour of the Summer theatre circuit. After the New York run, it should earn its producer and author a sizable fortune in stock rights.

If you're looking for heavy drama, for a problem play, "The Live Wire" is not your dish. But if you want to enjoy a riot of robust laughs, and temporarily escape from the momentous events of the day, it's well worth your while. Though the plot is on the thin side, there are in compensation a number of highly amusing situations and ingratiating performances.

"The Live Wire" has to do with a group of indigent actors who establish headquarters in a Quonset hut on a vacant lot in New York. They pool their resources and work resolutely for the advancement of each and all. That is, until a slick heel moves in on them. He provokes dissension, and they are unable to get rid of him until a magazine article about their unusual mode of life sends said heel off to Hollywood.

Kanin has directed his script at an effectively fast pace, and has cast it flawlessly. Peter Turgeon, Scott McKay, Rex Williams, Ned Wertimer, Elliott Reid, Chester Stratton, John Drew Colt, Joseph G. Sullivan, Jack Gilford and Pat Harrington are perfect as the histrionic musketeers. A special salute, perhaps, is due McKay, as the magnificent heel. Gilford and Harrington contribute a couple of hilarious characterizations.

Murvyn Vye walks on in the last act as a smooth-talking, high-powered Hollywood agent, and in a few brief minutes hits the bull's-eye with unerring aim. He had a distinguished and theatre-wise first-night audience—which included Margaret Truman—howling at his accurate satiric thrusts.

Sheila Bond is easy on the eyes and exactly right as a tempestuous, gold-digging dancer. Bows also are due Elspeth Eric, Peggy Cass, Douglas Chandler and Heywood Hale Broun.

Donald Oenslager has contributed a helpful setting and Forrest Thayer's costumes point up some of the fun.

We enjoyed "The Live Wire" and think you will, too. Many of the premierites remained after the final curtain to applaud and cheer. It gets the new season away to a merry start. It's wonderful to laugh again.

"THE LIVE WIRE"

Comedy by Garson Kanin; staged by Mr. Kanin; setting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Forrest Thayer; production under supervision of Kip Good; presented by Michael Todd at The Playhouse, August 17, 1950. The cast:

John Tobey, Jr. . . . Peter Turgeon
Ursula Poe . . . . . Sheila Bond
Mr. Finch . . . . Douglas Chandler
Leo Mack . . . . . Scott McKay
Horace Lundquist . . Rex Williams
Mitchell Mack . . . . Ned Wertimer
Granny Schenk . . . . . Elliott Reid
Ev Brogan . . . . . Chester Stratton
Rip Hulett . . . . . John Drew Colt
Sam Crocker . . Joseph G. Sullivan
Sol Margolis . . . . . Jack Gilford
Mike Shannon . . . . Pat Harrington
Dorothy Parrish . . . Elspeth Eric
Liz Fargo . . . . . Peggy Cass
Brian Freer . . . . . Murvyn Vye
Harry Holland . . . . . Heywood Hale Broun

Synopsis: The time is late summer, last year. The place is New York City.

Editor's Note:

Strike conditions at the NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM & SUN plant have prevented publication of that newspaper.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

August 18, 1950

The Serpent in an Actor's Eden

By Richard Watts Jr.

Out of his disillusioned knowledge of innumerable Hollywood-bound actors, Garson Kanin has written a new comedy called "The Live Wire," which is about a selfish and generally contemptible ingrate, destined for cinema success, who is the serpent in a cooperative Garden of Eden, otherwise inhabited by idyllic young strivers after theatrical success. Since Mr. Kanin put us all in his debt by his delightful "Born Yesterday," it is unpleasant to be forced to add that his latest work, which Michael Todd offered at the Playhouse last night, isn't very good.

This, it appears, is to be the season in which hitherto optimistic dramatists are going in for unexpected bitterness of spirit. Earlier in the week, Mr. Saroyan, who is ordinarily enthusiastic about the human race, gave us a play in which he was unhappy about almost everything. Now, Mr. Kanin, who has seemed inclined to believe that the good had a chance to inherit the earth, whispers to his listeners that Hollywood beckons to the heels and rats, while decent young men are lucky to get bit parts on the stage.

The Rover Boys

While the moral he has to point is basically melancholy, I should hasten to add that the comedy in which it is incorporated is not embittered in tone. Indeed, there is an odd Rover Boy quality about it, as his amiable and guileless young actors, the ones who are not headed for success, frolic gayly and make comical remarks in their quonset-hut home in a New York lot. There is a kind of prep school humor throughout most of the course of "The Live Wire," and Mr. Kanin has an undoubted talent for sharply bantering dialogue.

But there is something a little uncomfortable about sardonic Rover Boy stories. Such tales, I suspect, should at least give us a happy ending to repay us for the innocent spirit in which we must accept them. Mr Kanin does try to soften the triumph of selfish ruthlessness in his play by saying, rather unpersuasively, that success isn't everything and honest hearts have their small victories, too. But his play does little to make such minor victories impressive or, to tell you the truth, interesting, and the schoolboy romps he depicts grow monotonous and tiresome.

A Hollywood Agent

The third act does pick up a little. With Murvyn Vye, who gave a memorable performance in "Carousel," offering an amusingly dynamic portrait of a shrewd and horrible Hollywood agent, the final episode has considerable brightness, but it is, I fear, too late. "The Live Wire" lacks the humorous inventiveness and imagination we expect of Mr. Kanin, and there is an atmosphere of boyish charade about his comedy that grows almost irritating as it goes along. The young men of the quonset colony are pleasant fellows, but they also tend to be bores.

Although Mr. Vye has the good fortune to dominate the proceedings by his third-act appearance, the playing throughout is satisfactory. Scott McKay makes the Hollywood-bound insect, who is the title character, properly offensive, and Sheila Bond is vivid as a venomous trollop who is the comedy's other trouble-maker. More pleasant characters in the fable include Peter Turgeon, Rex Williams, Jack Gilford, Pat Harrington and John Drew Colt. But Mr. Kanin hasn't yet recaptured his proper form.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

August 18, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Blows A Fuse

IN "THE LIVE WIRE" Garson Kanin surveys a group of indigent actors whose co-operative existence is rudely interrupted by a go-getter, aptly described as not fit for human consumption. The idea has needed a lot of padding at the Playhouse. Night club turns and running gags are substituted for solid situations, and even the diverse characters in the comedy, including a predatory rockette, are tintypes. Aside from several amusing monologues and bits of pantomime, the show is repetitious and random. Even the gallant efforts of Murvyn Vye, Jack Gilford or Pat Harrington to go it on their own make for a modicum of merriment.

* * *

The dialogue is sometimes amusing, as the aspirant thespians horse around like so many sophomores, aiming most of their quips at the human anatomy. But Kanin has quite failed to write a funny play. A writer and photographer from "Life" visit the quonset hut which frames the action and the show-off supposedly gets whatever he thinks he is after when an actor's agent takes him over. The show stops where it starts, having accomplished little more than parades of the performers in their shorts. One has a right to expect something more antic than that from the author-director.

* * *

Vye, as a sort of comic deus ex machina, has a field day in the part of the agent who gets the live wire out of every one's hair after the fellow's picture has appeared on the front cover of "Life." Unfortunately his appearance is fleeting. Harrington is delightful in two or three passages which have little to do with what one presumes is a plot and Gilford engages in facial contortions when the action reaches the snapping point. Then there is a sprightly bit of business in which the rough-and-ready hut dwellers fake a long-distance call in order to spring a susceptible member from the clutches of a witch.

* * *

Most of the players have bumpy going. Scott McKay succeeds in making the title character obnoxious although he flounders when he is asked to activate the comedy. Sheila Bond has the part of the larcenous rockette who gets her come-uppance from a bigger heel than she is and Peter Turgeon is incredibly naive as a rich man's son who is willing to live in a sardine box on a vacant lot and pursue the career of his choice. Heywood Hale Broun appears at one point in an anomalous bit and John Drew Colt is also present. Kanin has kept them moving around the stage, but to a minimum of consequence. "The Live Wire" blows a fuse at the Playhouse.

Journal American

August 18, 1950

Few Gags, No Action Short Circuit In Plot

By JIM O'CONNOR

Before a distinguished audience —which included Margaret Truman, Sherman Billingsley, Paulette Goddard, Fanny Ward and Jack Benny—Producer Mike Todd attempted to make a Broadway connection last night for his new comedy, "The Live Wire," using the Playhouse as an outlet.

Upon examination I discovered "The Live Wire" is far from loaded with laughs. Some place there is a short circuit. Could be in the plot. Or maybe it's the director who blew the fuse.

At any rate, the standard of humor can be gauged by the fact that the playwright apparently thinks half a dozen fellows walking around in their drawers is a very funny sight. For a switch (and hoped-for laughs), he adds a few other guys in loud-colored pajamas.

The plot of this new comedy concerns the life and times of nine or 10 young men living in a quonset hut on a lot in Manhattan. Most of them are actors; two are working.

They pool their resources—if any. They also pool their debts and troubles. And try to make a go of living on a cooperative basis. Which certainly is not a new or novel idea.

* * *

Centers on Heel

The action (if you'll pardon the expression) centers around Scott McKay, who plays Leo Mack, a heel who barges into the combine; louses up the joint; borrows dough all around; steals his best friend's girl; tosses the gal back on her memories; hogs all the publicity the communal deal gets in a national picture magazine—and bows off with a new agent and a bid from Hollywood to do pictures.

Scott McKay gives a good performance, which is all anybody reasonably expect of him.

Sex reared its head from time to time, but it wasn't lovely. There are some topical jokes about the Shuberts, Hedy Lamarr and the Theatre Guild.

Best thing on the stage was the quonset hut setting by Donald Oenslager.

And the best acting was performed by Murvyn Vye, out of "Carousel" and "Oklahoma," who portrayed Brian Freer, a theatrical agent. But Vye didn't come on until the third act. By that time, it was too late for even a repair man to do much with "The Live Wire."

The trouble with this play is—nothing really happens. It's very thin; mildly amusing in spots; there are a lot of heated words—but not much light. Only action in three acts is a fist fight.

The direction, by the way, was on a par with the plot.

An actor would feed a line. There'd be a pause, as if the second actor was waiting for a cue from the wings. Then the second actor would come through with a punch-line.

* * *

A Likable Guy

"Spontaneous" definitely is not the word for this kind of dialogue.

For evidence, I present herewith a mimeographed statement by a spokesman for Producer Mike Todd, Author Garson Kanin and Director Garson Kanin:

"Typical of the Kanin brand of wit which 'The Live Wire' abounds in is the observation made by a brassy blond girl to a young man.

"'You're just young,' she says. 'But from young to old, it's possible to get. From old to young, that's a little harder'."

Get it? Well, at least you get the general idea!

Pat Harrington, likable guy and a handy man with a gag, tried hard to liven up things last night—even if Pat had to walk around in his drawers and press his own pants on stage. Peggy Cass had a brief but good bit as a camera girl.

Although Sheila Bond can dance very well, she now aspires to become an actress. Well, it's a laudable ambition. Making funny faces got Jack Gilford his laughs.

Incidentally, Ethel Barrymore's son, John Drew Colt, and Heywood Broun's son, Heywood Hale Broun, are in the cast. But the only place you'll notice them is in the program.

Others in "The Live Wire" did the best they could with the tools they had. Somebody, however, forgot to bring all the tools.

Of course, there were a few flashes. Not all the gags were lame; some were clever. But they were almost lost in the filibuster on stage.

This may come as a shock to Producer Todd, Playwright Kanin and Director Kanin—but, in making out my report, I'm listing "The Live Wire" as a dud.

Robert Garland is ill. His reviews will be resumed upon his recovery.

The New York Times

August 18, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Being tired of the summer, Garson Kanin has done something about it by staging a comedy of his own. "The Live Wire" he calls it. It opened at The Playhouse last evening to an audience looking brown and in good health. Taking a group of impecunious young actors, Mr. Kanin has installed them on the cooperative plan in a quonset hut, where they live with no visible privacy, but in general good humor.

To provide a little perspective, he introduces a moucher, schemer and conniver who wrecks the amiable spirit of the colony by knocking over everyone who stands in the way of his career. Mr. Kanin's heel knows the racket, has no scruples and becomes the only actor in the lot who succeeds.

* * *

As a theatre piece, "The Live Wire" stands somewhere between "The Rat Race" and "Born Yesterday." It is simpler than the one, but a good deal less hilarious than the other. Although Mr. Kanin is taking things more easily than in his last two plays, he has not recovered the pace and substance of his best work. In fact, "The Live Wire" is on the desultory side—a little thin even for midsummer wear.

It would be nice if we could just forget the drama as a whole, and look at "The Live Wire" as an episodic vaudeville show. For Mr. Kanin has a knack for pithy dialogue that sounds sardonic, though it is actually derived from a fond attitude toward the characters. And as a director he is superb. The pace, the pauses and the emphases of the performance are top-shelf theatre work.

* * *

For purposes of vaudeville, it would be hard to improve on a cast that includes some expert performers. Pat Harrington, who made "The Rat Race" sit up and take notice last season, has one gusty scene in the beginning. Jack Gilford's sketch of a man trying to stay awake is the peak of the entertainment. As a gold-plated actor's agent with the ethical standards of a monster, Murvyn Vye has a perfect scene of resonant skulduggery. As usual, Heywood Hale Broun has a microscopic part as a sort of on-stage echo, but he plays it very skillfully.

As a matter of fact, the acting is excellent throughout—especially so in the case of Scott McKay, as the triumphant heel; Sheila Bond, as a brassy strumpet, and Rex Williams, as the leader of the tin-can community. No man to house an actor in a bleak environment, Donald Oenslager has done an attractive job of interior decoration on the quonset hut and beautifully sketched in some of the garishness of Manhattan as background, taking pains also to light the setting imaginatively.

After the idyllic summer siesta, it is pleasant to get in out of the open air again and to discover that our craftsmen and technicians are in good form. Mr. Kanin is writing humorously on a subject he knows and about people he feels kindly toward. He has not quite made a going play out of them at the moment. His playwriting is less decisive than his direction.

DAILY NEWS

August 18, 1950

Some Talented Youngsters Make 'The Live Wire' Good Summer Fun

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

Garson Kanin brightened up Summer show business last night with a pleasantly hokey and generally funny little comedy called "The Live Wire." It's one of those shows that a George Kaufman or a George Abbott could write with their eyes closed—and, indeed, already have—but it has some laughs and gets the season off to a happy start.

"The Live Wire" concerns a group of actors who for one reason and another (lack of money being the commonest reason) are living in a Quonset hut. There are eight of them. Each a different type character and each full of jokes. A lot of things can happen in a situation like this whether or not it could ever exist.

Some Funny Youngsters.

Perhaps the most important thing that happens in "The Live Wire" is that, being a story about talented young people, it actually has a whole stagefull of them on view. It seemed to this observer that Hollywood ought to grab almost all of them. Usually shows of this type are full of such dreadful youths that you can hardly bring yourself to care what happens to them.

Into the happy if confused and stubbornly comical life of the Quonset Eight comes another actor—a first class heel. He louses up everything. He's dishonest with loot and he steals other guy's girls. When Life comes to do a picture story on the hut community—oh, sure, that damned Life gets everywhere — the heel turns it into a personality story which brings him the big break but leaves his roomies right back where they were at the beginning.

That's about all there is to it. Nothing to bring the Pulitzer Committee rushing back from their vacations. But every time "The Live Wire" starts to flounder there is some youngster ready to jump in and squeeze a few hard laughs out of nothing.

There is Sheila Bond, first, as a Rockette at the telephone. Miss Bond, a musical comedy dancer, proves herself a first class brash comedienne in two scenes and, further, she's cute. And there is Rex Williams playing a conscientious worrier with a warmth and charm which are original and imaginative. This boy ought to be a fine film bet. There's also Jack Gilford, a young night club pro, who has enough tested comedy tricks to come to the script's rescue at any time. And there's Murvyn Vye in one of those third-act roles Joseph Buloff used to do. Vye plays a powerhouse talent salesman and he got some well-deserved howls last night.

All Good Jobs.

Scott McKay does a good job as the heel and Pat Harrington, another refugee from a night club piano, has some bits which he handles surely and comically. Peggy Cass is a funny photographer and Elspeth Eric is a pretty magazine writer. In fact, everybody's good.

There are funny lines and unfunny lines and at times the whole thing sounds like Mike and Ike on the Telephone. But you have to laugh at Kanin's "The way to be a success on television is to take a course of acting through Venetian blinds" and stuff like that there. As his own director, Kanin seems to suspect that if he doesn't keep things going fast and loud everybody will get wise to him. He was probably right, but a couple of wholesale fist fight scenes were pretty unconvincing.

It's more or less "Room Service" with different jokes but "The Live Wire" is generally funny enough for the hot weather, at least.

"The Medium" & "The Telephone"

Journal American

July 20, 1950

Zelma Is Fabulous In a Fine Show

By ROBERT GARLAND

Minus Marie Powers, an orchestra and a setting, Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Medium" has opened in the round at the Hotel Edison's Arena. Of the original midtown setup, Evelyn Keller's Monica and Leo Coleman's Toby remain. As a curtain-raiser in a curtainless theatre there is, of course, "The Telephone."

On the plus side are a new Madame Flora, a new Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau and a new Mrs. Nolan. And some new production business from the composer-librettist-director on behalf of the featured performer, who seances in a wheelchair, and the unavoidable physical constrainments of what is known as central staging.

Between the plus and minus, Mr. Menotti's honest-to-goodness melodrama, having found its popular success by way of Columbia University, the Ballet Society, the Cowles - Zimbalist - Lutyens Company, the City Center and David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas, is by way of being an accepted modern classic.

With Gian-Carlo Menotti's okay and assistance, you can treat it as you please, just as if it were "Rigoletto."

• • •

They, Mr. Heilweil, Mr. Lynn-Thomas and Chandler Cowles, with Mr. Menotti's okay and assistance, do treat "The Medium" like "Rigoletto," which also is an honest-to-goodness melodrama by an Italian who never became an American citizen. But Signor Menotti, with Signor Verdi, is blood-and-thunder minded.

Blood and thunder are featured at the Arena. Up on a stage or down on a platform, you will never, I hope, spend a more scarey evening. And if you take the home folks with you, poor Tony, the misunderstood mute, is shot, murdered and likewise done to death right in the bosom of your fainting family.

This, with two not very grand pianos, each out of tune with itself and fellow, pounding out Mr. Menotti's music on a balcony, is Broadwayard and exciting. In the second of two acts it makes your hair, and companion stand on end while Madame Flora deserts her wheel chair and is on her feet and beside herself in earnest.

Drawing a gun to do the poor mute in, she last night fired point blank at our most distinguished drama critic. She missed him!

• • •

When I say that, as Madame Flora, Zelma George over-Powers Marie, I mean it. I find Miss George's antics, voice and reading fascinating. I never knew what "beside yourself" meant until "The Medium" came to the Arena. There, the lady of the title is that way throughout the two-act tragedy.

Hers is a fabulous performance, actorially, vocally and physically. Making her first Broadway appearance, Miss George, a Clevelander with an M.A., a Ph.D. and a flair for joining, has appeared sixty-seven times as Madame Flora in her home town. And managed miraculously to hold herself together.

Evelyn Keller's Monica is as it used to be, although adapted to the round. Leo Coleman's Toby remains a great pantomimic performance. He sings and acts the role of the mute superbly without uttering a sound. The others are on the right side, as are Pianists William McDermott and Leonard Kastle, in spite of their untuned Mathusheks. Ditto William Riva and his props.

"THE MEDIUM" AND "THE TELEPHONE"

Revival of two musical plays by Gian-Carlo Menotti; staged by Mr. Menotti; musical direction by William McDermott; settings by William Riva; presented by David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas in association with Chandler Cowles at the Arena in the Hotel Edison, July 19, 1950. The cast:

"The Telephone"

Lucy.....Edith Gordon
Ben.....Paul King

"The Medium"

Monica.....Evelyn Keller
Toby, a mute.....Leo Coleman
Madame Flora (Baba).....Zelma George
Mrs. Gobineau...Derna De Lys
Mr. Gobineau.....Paul King
Mrs. Nolan.....Dorothy Staiger

Synopsis: The action takes place in Madame Flora's parlor, in our time. Act I. Evening. Act II. Evening. A few days later.

At the Arena "The Medium" lets its hair down and goes to town as a thriller of a grand opera. "The Telephone" still tinkles.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

July 20, 1950

A Powerful Madame Flora Arrives

By Vernon Rice

Good news is always pleasant to report, and it becomes my extreme good fortune to report today that there arrived last night around the corner from Broadway an actress who can sing and a singer who can act. I am referring, of course, to Zelma George, who was brought on from Cleveland to play Madame Flora in the Theatre-In-The-Round production of Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Medium", which David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas, in association with Chandler Cowles, brought to the Arena in the Hotel Edison.

Mrs. George's interpretation of the sinister and fraudulent fortune-teller, who is driven to murder and madness by the trickery she has created for others, can only be described as that in "the grand manner." The dramatic soprano would be completely ill at ease in the presence of the school of actors who render only lip service to their roles.

Lady Weight-Lifter

There is nothing subtle in her characterization. Mrs. George is a large and overwhelmingly powerful woman, and she tossed her part around with the same force that an Amazon weight-lifter might whirl her weights.

But let's face it. Menotti has composed and written a highly theatrical Grand Guignol of a lyric drama. His fable is slight but he has trimmed it with primitive emotions, the macabre and haunting sensuosness.

The music Menotti has provided Madame Flora to sing goes as high as the heavens and to the depths of the soul. Its range is practically inhuman. Only a superhuman person can sing the score. Marie Powers managed it magnificently in the original Chander Cowles-Efrem Zimbalist Jr. production. Zelma George contributes animal ferocity.

Singing to Mrs. George is not an art; it is an instinctive driving force like a loud wail of anguish in a torturous night or the sudden cry of joy from an uninhibited being.

How does all this seem in arena staging? Terrifyingly exciting. Horror becomes one's intimate companion while unreality changes to the real.

From a Wheel-Chair

Mrs. George adds a humanizing touch by making Madame Flora a paralytic and singing the role from a wheel-chair.

Present again are Evelyn Keller as Monica to sing the eerie phrase, "Mother, Mother are you there?" and Leo Coleman, with his controlled grace to play the terrified mute, Toby. They handle their roles so perfectly and give such able support to Mrs. George, that it is hard to imagine this or any other production of "The Medium" without them.

Accompanying "The Medium" as a curtain-raiser is "The Telephone." One could not go on without the other. This short sketch seems to have found its proper place, after being lost several years in the broad expanse of a normal stage. The intimacy of Theatre-In-The-Round affectionately enfolds its frailty, and, though its humor doesn't become any more robust, it seems far less precious. The two pianos, replacing a pit orchestra for both the works, give all the musical background necessary for the piece.

As the loquacious Lucy, the girl who couldn't stop talking on the telephone long enough to hear a marriage proposal, Edith Gordon has wit, style and a pleasant lyric soprano voice. Paul King played the frustrated suitor in a suitably light and agreeable manner.

Again Menotti directed both lyric dramas. The results of his staging make them seem as though they were designed for no other medium except Theatre-In-The-Round.

Having been played in all the corners of the earth, "The Medium" and "The Telephone" have now returned to find a new home.

The audience last night cheered a loud and lusty welcome.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

July 20, 1950

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Menotti-in-the-Round

GIAN-CARLO MENOTTI'S "The Medium" and "The Telephone" have been given a theater-in-the-round production at the Hotel Edison's Arena. While a single piano provides the accompaniment, the audience looks right over the shoulder of Menotti's fake spiritualist as she screams in terror at hearing real ghostly voices. As presented in this theatrical form, the two-act opera loses a little of its musical charm and a lot of its style, but it gains in melodramatic volume. Brought out in the open between four walls of audience, "The Medium" is still effective, but it becomes a shocker rather than a haunting chiller.

* * *

In transition to the Arena stage, "The Medium" must necessarily give up its brooding set and the airy freedom of movement in the characters of the medium's daughter and the angular deaf mute who loves her. The vocal arrangements, with actors singing in different directions, do not seem to have their former integration. But in this version Madame Flora becomes a hideous, brooding figure whose mounting dread is seen in close-up as well as heard in the score. In these close quarters the magnified drama is as disturbing as a pistol shot fired next to the eardrum. It is Grand Guignol whose impact is numbing rather than emotionally moving.

* * *

Zelma George, playing Madame Flora, broods over her seances and her personal dreads in a complete domination of the stage. Hers is a harsh and strident performance which, though appropriate to the role, comes dangerously close to overwhelming all other values in the intimacy of a theater-in-the-round production. Evelyn Keller and Leo Coleman, the Monica and Toby of the original cast, are limited in scope but manage to radiate their youthful exuberance in the midst of dark events. "The Medium" has been compressed out of its natural shape, and something had to give somewhere. It is still a striking piece of musical theater.

The light-hearted curtain-raiser "The Telephone" benefits from production under the Arena's magnifying-glass. Its one joke about a suitor trying to propose to a talkative telephone addict sustains itself well at close quarters, and Menotti's music shines through the filmsy situation. There is no strain in the author's staging of either work; the characters are portioned out to all sides of the theater without any visible contrivances of motion. On the whole, the conversion of "The Medium" and "The Telephone" to theater-in-the-round has been successfully accomplished, adding modern opera to the repertoire of its summer experiments.

The New York Times

July 20, 1950

2 MENOTTI OPERAS IN UNUSUAL SHOW

'Telephone' and 'Medium' Are Given at the Arena in New Theatrical Presentation

The Arena, which up to now has concerned itself with the legitimate theatre, last night turned its attention to music, with a performance of Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Telephone" and "The Medium."

For those who missed the vital statistics on The Arena, it presents dramatic spectacles "in the round." The stage is a platform, raised about a foot off the ground, and about fifteen feet square. Banked on all four sides are chairs, a few hundred of them; and above, on three sides, is a tiny balcony.

This was perhaps the first time in New York history that an opera has been presented under such circumstances. Since Mr. Menotti as a dramatist is probably superior to Mr. Menotti as a musician, the dramatic side of his twin bill came out right well. It fited beauifully on the little stage; there was no loss of atmosphere. If anything, the atmosphere was ehanced.

Musically, though, there could be a few reservations. Most of the latter concern the accompaniment, which was valiantly played on two pianos by Leonard Kastle and William McDermott, who did not even get a mention in the fore part of the program. Mr. Kastle played upon an instrument that suffered from a violent attack of vibraphonitis with xylophone characteristics.

It was "The Medium" that presented the company at its best. Previously, in "The Telephone," Edith Gordon was not up to the severe vocal demands of the score. Paul King was a more reliable performer; but in any case the humor of this little one-acter is wearing out its welcome.

Together with such familiar "Medium" performers as Evelyn Keller and Leo Coleman, there was a newcomer in the central role of Madame Flora. This was Zelma George, who acted for the most part in a terrifyingly convincing manner. It was toward the end, where she pulled out so many histrionic stops that not only she but the stage jangled, that her characterization seemed a little forced; otherwise it fully deserved the bravos it evoked.

The other singers included Dorna de Lys, Dorothy Staiger and Paul King, all excellent. It is interesting to add, by the way, that the intimacy of the surroundings and the relative lack of props and scenery, not to mention the sight of an audience virtually peering down the singers' throats, did not destroy the stage illusion. But don't look for "Gotterdammerung" or "Rosenkavalier" under such conditions. Not yet, anyway.

H. C. S.

Daily Mirror

July 20, 1950

Menotti Twin-Bill Thrills Audience at the Arena

By ROBERT COLEMAN

As one who did not rave over Gian-Carlo Menotti's "The Medium" and "The Telephone" when they were first presented in New York, pardon me if I eat a little tough crow this morning. I saw this twin bill again last evening at The Arena in the Hotel Edison and I am still tingling from a real thrill.

David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas, in association with Chandler Cowles, offered the dual bill in the new and increasingly popular theatre-in-the-round production technique. It was amazing to see what could be done with a handful of props, skillful lighting by William Riva and no sets.

The versatile Menotti, of course, staged both works, which have been described as musical sketches, musical plays and even operas. And, be it reported, that Menotti's gift for direction still matches his talents as librettist and composer. He is a great man of the theatre.

"The Medium," you may recall, is a musical tour-de-force wherein a fake spiritualist is destroyed through her own chicanery. The leading role is one of the most difficult in all theatre, or opera, if you choose to call it that. I thought that Marie Powers had created the role of the medium definitively in the original production.

But that was before I saw and heard Zelma George, a huge artist from Cleveland, Ohio, as the famous Madame Flora. And I mean "huge" in more than one way. Mrs. George must weigh at least 270 pounds—and she being a woman, I trust, will forgive me for this description. She plays much of the two acts in a wheelchair. She is terrific.

Mrs. George held her audience in the palm of her hand. She held her audience spellbound. You could have heard a feather drop in the Edison's Arena. Her performance had the impact and inevitability of Greek tragedy. It was magnificent. It merited the salvos of bravos it received.

Evelyn Keller, as Monica, is admirable. She has an irresistible lyric quality. Leo Coleman has made Toby, the deaf-mute, a role particularly his own. He has no peers in it. I could not conceive of anyone else doing the part, after witnessing Coleman's remarkable performance many times and bestowing superlatives upon it.

As for "The Telephone," it remains for us a light, frothy, tony and satiric musical skit about a gal who likes to gab over the wire. Edith Gordon is delightful as the gabby Lucy, a sort of demi-mondaine who likes to yat-ta-ti-yat all day over the telephone with her pals. She sings the role with facility and acts it with charm. She's the best we've yet heard do this role. Paul King is excellent as the harassed suitor, a bumbling sort of butter-and-egg man.

By all means, see "The Medium" and "The Telephone." You cannot afford to miss them. Personally, we suspect this twin Menotti bill will eclipse at the box-office the Arena's recent "Julius Caesar." The new program offers a wonderful evening of musical theatre.